

Political Engagement

A New Article of Lived Faith

Dawn Morais

Where then is hope?
not a nail hammered true,
no joist firm without.
Nor could roof sustain
airborne, ceiling bone dry
in driving rain, like spread wing
over fledgling; grace
beyond dumb duty. Fires fare
in face of cold; someone invoked
someone breathes on behalf.

Daniel Berrigan, “Block Island”

COVID-19 forced all of us to hunker down in our homes. But for almost half of all the men, women, and children in Hawai‘i living in or on the edge of poverty, and especially for the thousands living on the sidewalks and beaches, home is without firm joists, often without a roof, and too often without hope. Will the disease that literally takes our breath away teach us to breathe new life into our faith? Will we get beyond the beautiful hymns sung on Zoom, beyond the fervent prayers? Will faith be expressed with the same clarity and earnestness in the civic square?

It will—*IF* people in the pews—and those who have left—challenge faith leaders who have helped advance political agendas that hurt people. As the prophet Isaiah instructed, we must declare what we see with our votes, testimony, and vigilance as watchmen to ensure that public policy serves the public (Isa. 21). Some have spoken out about the need to feed the hungry, shelter the houseless, care for prisoners, tend to the sick, and more. Such advocacy can define how faith is lived here, if people of faith assert themselves as “church,” and embrace engagement in political life.

The modern history of churches has too often been about shoring up those in power. Cardinal Timothy Dolan recently defended saying he admired Trump’s leadership, which he “salutes,” by claiming he was engaged in the “sacred enterprise

of accompaniment and engagement and dialogue” (O’Loughlin). But the people in the pews feel less and less accompanied, engaged, or in dialogue with church leadership, and young people are not attracted to a corporatized church that violates their instinct for justice.

Caring for each other is the most basic expression of faith. Love God. Love your neighbor as yourself. The opulent vestments and grand cathedrals came with the institutionalization of what began as a radical call for justice and compassion.

Old habits are hard to break, but we can try. At a Zen retreat on the Hāmākua coast on Hawai‘i island, host Akiko Masuda offers this prayer:

We live in modesty and simplicity,
 palms together, head bowed in gratitude,
 giving thanks for each inhale
 and each exhale.
 We settle deeply, surrendering our bones
 and our being to the earth,
 grounded deeply in our precious Hawai‘i.
 May we live fully in peace
 and service to others.

It’s time to look inward and outward. Weeks into our forced COVID-19 retreat, I listened to a podcast of Rev. Jim Wallis of *Sojourners* in conversation with Rev. Eugene Cho, president-elect of Bread for the World, and a briefing by a Hawai‘i legislative staffer about federal aid to address the economic fallout of COVID-19. The ministers talked about a covenantal relationship with our neighbors. About a shared humanity, something Bishop Desmond Tutu calls *ubuntu*. About the hunger of children who depend on school meals, the lack of a living wage, and racism fueled by references to the “Chinese virus.” They spoke about going from the pulpit into the public square.

Running through the legislative briefing was the sense of a bureaucracy infected by its clutch on power and the purse. Advocates felt pressured not to make lawmakers look bad, despite their failure to respond to the people’s dire needs. Even before the pandemic hit, nearly half were living paycheck to paycheck, with thousands on the sidewalks. But non-profits urging that priority be given to addressing hunger and shelter for families were largely drowned out by business voices.

House Speaker Scott Saiki prioritized the need to “modernize our economy,” because the “future of our families and state relies upon a sound and resilient economy” (“Governor”). Our families, struggling after missing two months’ paychecks, were asked to keep waiting, while legislators squabbled over who controlled the federal aid.

The faith community was missing from the team asked to map a way out of this valley of suffering. Lawmakers may have faith that people will not die waiting,

but the faith leaders actually engaging with troubled families every day are not being invited to help shape the response to the crisis.

Rev. Sam Domingo, last president of the now dissolved Hawai'i Council of Churches, is not surprised. "Churches have become less relevant to our political leaders," he said to me, "They do not look to us to help guide the state through a crisis like the one we are going through now. They look to business executives."

Politicians still look to the churches for ceremony. The legislative session always begins with a Red Mass at the Cathedral. And here as elsewhere, the over-worked offering of "thoughts and prayers" professes a turning to faith in moments of despair, when the pain is visible, raw, bloody.

But much of the pain of this pandemic is hidden. It is behind the doors of homes where there is no food. Where disadvantaged children struggle without computers or broadband or parents capable of delivering effective homeschooling. Where financial stress is driving up domestic violence. The pandemic has also made visible women's heavy load as primary caregivers and as contributors to household income.

Faith should not be a prop; it should offer moral clarity publicly. Since places of worship are also places where people seek refuge, a rational approach would ensure that people of faith, and not just business leaders, plan Hawai'i's recovery. They bring the gifts and graces of faith, and an understanding of community pain beyond the abilities of most business executives.

But churches themselves must change. If "the glory of God is a living man," as the early church father Irenaeus said, churches must speak out far more forcefully against making a person work a full day, yet not earn enough to simply survive. Churches must stop giving middle-class politicians and business leaders who serve on philanthropic boards, attend church faithfully, and donate generously the comfort of thinking those actions are enough.

Churches that do not pay their workers a living wage cannot speak for the dignity of labor. Schools and churches that fire people for being openly gay cannot preach about a God who welcomes all. The oppressiveness of male clerical authority in the most intimate questions of reproduction is the last gasp of patriarchy. Clergy must accompany not just the powerful, but those the pandemic has revealed as truly *essential*: stevedores, sanitation workers, bus drivers, janitors, nurses, home care workers, postal workers, farmers, grocery store clerks, and preparers of food.

Faith should make us see, make us insist on tax fairness, on a living wage, on care of the vulnerable. It means saying "NO" publicly to the ever-widening chasm between executive pay and starvation wages. Having been, as the psalmist said, "through fire and water" we must be guided by faith to "a place of abundance for all" (Ps. 66). This concept is reflected in Hawai'i's own remembrance of 'Āina Momona, when the land did indeed provide for all.

Emerging from the hell of COVID-19, faith communities must become the living bread. We must leaven our politics—and not only with entreaty but with

insistence on dignity for all. The pandemic is an invitation to rebuild. To not just sing hosannas to heaven, but also do the dirty, not always welcome work on earth of justice-seeking. Aloha. Ubuntu. A person is a person through another person because we share the breath of life.

We must accompany. We must see, and declare. Faith without engagement in our political life is a poverty we can no longer afford.

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